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Johan Ferdinand Peterson: Minnesota Pioneer and Civil War Casualty

James E. Erickson*

The Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church of St. Paul, organized 23 July 1853, was the first congregation established solely by and for Scandinavians in Minnesota.¹ It emerged from the English-speaking Methodist Episcopal church in St. Paul, itself a fledgling congregation less than four years old, during the pastorate of the Rev. Thomas M. Fullerton.² Fortunately, Fullerton was not only an active participant in the development of the Scandinavian class within his congregation; he was also a keen observer who kept a journal!

While researching the history of the Scandinavian congregation in St. Paul, I came across a number of excerpts from Fullerton's journal. The following two entries in particular peaked my curiosity, because they described a rather mysterious and intriguing Swede by the name of Peterson:

"Saturday Feb. 26, 1853. We have continued our meetings in the church, having preaching every night. Several have been converted, and a deep seriousness is manifested among all who attend. The church is much revived, especially among our Swedish members. A Swede, formerly a Lutheran, came fifteen miles today on foot, having heard of our meetings, to enjoy the means of grace tomorrow. He said, 'There is something here,' laying his hand on his breast, 'which makes me very unhappy, and I came here to see if I cannot get it removed.' I have today written to Bro. Willerup, of our Norwegian mission in Wisconsin, to come up. There are many of these people here, ripe for the harvest, but they cannot understand English."

"Monday Feb. 28. [1853] The Swede mentioned Saturday was converted on Saturday night. He has just called on me at the parsonage before starting home. His statement is that he has been a Lutheran—has a wife and six children — lived a while in New York— his wife attended Methodist meetings

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there — but when she became serious he laughed her out of it. They came to Minnesota. He made a claim—built a house—opened his farm, but a man entered his land, and he lost all. Last spring he entered some land, raised a good crop, got it threshed and housed, and the fire consumed it all. He is now poor. A week ago yesterday some of our Swedish brethren visited him. Since then he could not sleep or work—felt something bad in his heart. His wife told him he had better go to St. Paul and get the people to pray for him, but he thought he would get over it, but got worse—went to work on Saturday morning but could do nothing—dropped his ax and started to St. Paul. Now he says he sees through all his misfortunes—God was leading him a way he did not know—says his old religion has no warmth—no soul in it. He speaks seven different languages, and is an intelligent man. His name is Peterson." (This man was a neighbor of Uncle Jacob, in Washington Co.)³

The vague, almost cryptic, clues notwithstanding, it is now quite clear that the man noted by Fullerton is none other than Johan (John) Ferdinand Peterson, a Minnesota pioneer and Civil War casualty.

Johan Ferdinand Peterson was b. in Landskrona (Malm.) 3 April 1819, the s. of Nils Petersson, a bookbinder, and Maria Elisabeth Moberg. On 23 Aug. 1839 he married Catharina Erika Hördin (Herdin), who was b. in Gävle (Gävl.) 18 May 1821, the illegitimate dau. of Margareta Hördin (Herdin), a servant. They had the following children (all b. in Gävle): Erika Paulina, b. 18 Dec. 1840; Victor Ferdinand, b. 30 Jan. 1843; Johan Emanuel, b. 7 Mar. 1845; Theodore Erik (Erik Oscar?), b. 1 May 1846; and Nils Gottfrid, b. 6 Oct. 1848.⁴

Although Johan Ferdinand is purported to have emigrated to the U.S. before his wife and children, his name has not yet been found on either passport registers or ship manifests. Catharina Erika, however, received passports for herself and the five children (ages 11, 9, 7, 4, and 2) in Gävle 20 Aug. 1850. They arrived in New York from Stockholm on 8 Nov. 1850 aboard the ship *Walter R. Jones*.⁵ After a brief stay in New York, the family headed west. They arrived in St. Paul, MN 23 May 1851 aboard a paddle boat.⁶

John opened a tailor shop in St. Paul and quickly struck up friendships with two Swedes who had preceded him—Henry Russell, a tailor and charter member of the Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church (and, coincidentally, a schoolmate of Catharina Erika's in Gävle!) and Jacob Fahlström, the first Swede and the first Methodist convert in Minnesota. In 1852, the Peterson family moved to Washington Co. near Mound Prairie, and thus became neighbors of the Jacob Fahlström family. A.E. Strand briefly mentions this relationship: "The first Swede

whom Fahlström ever met, since his arrival on this continent, was a tailor by the name of John Peterson. They met in St. Paul. Peterson accompanied Fahlström to his home in Afton and liked the land so well that he decided to make his home there. He moved there in 1852 and was the second Swede in that settlement."⁷ Johan F. Petterson and Christina [*sic*] E. Petterson of Washington Co. were received on probation in 1853 by the newly organized Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church of St. Paul.⁸ The following children were born into the Peterson family while they lived near Mound Prairie: Elizabeth, b. 15 Feb. 1852; Hortense Christine, b. 2 Sept. 1855; and Adolph Fritchief, b. Aug. 1857.⁹

Peterson family history corroborates the misfortunes alluded to by Fullerton in his journal entries. At the time of the birth of Elizabeth, the family was living in a rented house near the original claim on which John Ferdinand had filed; but, before he could "prove up" on this claim, one of his neighbors had "jumped" it. He subsequently filed a second claim on land approximately two miles from the original claim. Oscar Augustus Peterson, John Ferdinand's youngest son and family historian, writes: "That season they raised a splendid crop of grain, threshed it and stored it in the field, while a granary was being built on the claim. Before the crop could be transferred a prairie fire took crop, lumber for the house, and everything in the field."¹⁰

After losing this second claim because of an inability to make payment on it, John and a neighbor traveled to Stearns Co. in the spring of 1859 and took up adjoining claims near the city of Sauk Centre. The rest of the Peterson family joined John in the fall. The 1860 U.S. Census lists 10 members of the Peterson family living on this farm near Sauk Centre, and indicates the value of their real estate at \$800; the value of their personal estate at \$300.¹¹ The last Peterson child, Oscar Augustus Peterson, was b. near Sauk Centre 13 July 1861 and was named after a neighbor, August Lindbergh, the grandfather of Charles Lindbergh, the famous aviator.¹²

Two of the Peterson men—Victor, the oldest son, and John, the father—enlisted in the Union army during the first year of the Civil War. On 17 Oct. 1861, Victor Peterson, age 19, was mustered in Company H, Third Regiment, Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. After three years of service, he was mustered out 14 Nov. 1864.¹³ John F. Peterson, age 43, was mustered in Company G, Seventh Regiment, Minnesota Volunteer Infantry on 21 Aug. 1862.¹⁴ His regiment immediately saw action within the state of Minnesota during the Sioux Uprising, which lasted from 17 Aug. to 26 Dec. 1862.¹⁵ While John was fighting the Sioux, the rest of the Peterson family were fleeing from them. They left Stearns Co., and stayed briefly with friends in St. Paul; moved to the town of

Afton in Washington Co.; and finally bought a 200 acre farm near Afton. Johan F. Petterson was received into full membership of the Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul by letter 23 Mar. 1863.¹⁶ According to the 1865 Minnesota Census, all Peterson family members (except the father, John F.) were living together in the town of Afton as of 1 June.¹⁷ Pvt. John F. Peterson had d. at Jefferson Barracks, MO 16 Oct. 1864 and was also buried there.¹⁸

According to the 1870 U.S. Census, enumerated 22 July 1870, Catharina Erika and her five youngest children were still living in Afton.¹⁹ Just two days earlier, however, John G. Holms [*sic*] and Erica C. Peterson had filed for a marriage license at the Washington Co. courthouse in Stillwater. Neither the marriage date nor the place are listed in the record.²⁰ That it took place ca. 24 July 1870 can be inferred from Peterson family records, which note that the new husband, John G. Holmes, was killed by lightning just one month after the wedding.²¹ The *Saint Paul Pioneer* published a brief account of this tragic event:

LIGHTNING
A Man Killed in Washington County
Woodbury, Washington Co., Aug. 25
To the Editors of the *Saint Paul Pioneer*.

During the storm, yesterday, Mr. Holmes, who recently married the widow Peterson, residing in the town of Afton, was struck and instantly killed by lightning, while lying on the floor. He was the only person in the room. Several persons in other parts of the house were stunned. When he was discovered they saw just one quiver of one arm. They cannot find any marks on his person or on the house, where the lightning struck....²²

In 1874, Catharina, Hortence, Adolph, and Oscar moved to 118 Woodward St. in St. Paul.²³ Catharina died here on 4 Dec. 1878. Her funeral was from the Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church, on the corner of Tenth and Temperance streets, on Friday, 6 Dec. at 2 o'clock p.m.²⁴

Notes

¹ T. Otto Nall, *Forever Beginning* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1973), 66-67.

² Rev. Thomas M. Fullerton was readmitted to the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1851 and stationed (appointed to serve) at St. Paul from 1851 to 1853. He located (stepped away from the itinerant ministry) in 1853. — *Minutes of the Wisconsin Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1851-53*, United Methodist Church, Minnesota Annual Conference Historical Society Archives, Minneapolis, MN.

For a recent discussion on the founding of the Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN see James E. Erickson and Laura J. Erickson, "Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN Members, 1853-1860," *Swedish American Genealogist* Vol.14 (December 1994).

³ Fullerton's journal entries were taken from "Sketch of Scandinavian Missions by T. M. Fullerton, 1878," pp. 3-4, Methodist Episcopal Church, Minnesota Annual Conference Historical Society Papers 1840-1909, BA6.1.M592h, Box 1, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul (hereafter cited as Meth. Hist. Soc. MSS). They are also cited in Chauncey Hobart, *The History of Methodism in America* (Red Wing, MN: Red Wing Printing, 1887), 118-19. The neighbor referred to as "Uncle Jacob" was Jacob Fahlström.

⁴ Nils William Olsson, *Swedish Passenger Arrivals in New York 1820-1850* (Chicago: Swedish Pioneer Historical Society, 1967), 258-60 (hereafter cited as SPANY).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Oscar Augustus Peterson, "Our Horse and Buggy Days—And Before: An Historical Sketch of the Family of John Ferdinand Peterson," San Bernardino, CA, 3 Dec. 1947, Minnesota Historical Society Manuscript FF615.S2P4, 2-3.

⁷ A. E. Strand, ed., *A History of the Swedish-Americans of Minnesota*, vol. 1, (Chicago: Lewis Publ. Co., 1910), 133.

⁸ See Table 2, nos. 27 and 28 in James E. Erickson and Laura J. Erickson, "Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN Members, 1853-1860," *Swedish American Genealogist* Vol. 14 (December 1994).

⁹ Peterson, "Horse and Buggy Days," 3-4. The 1857 Minnesota Census, enumerated 4 Nov. 1857, lists the following individuals in the Peterson household located in Washington Co., T. 28 N., R. 37 W.: John F., 39, farmer; C. E., 37; Pauline, 17; Victor F., 14; John E., 13; Eric, 12; Godfried, 9; Elizabeth, 6; Hortenze, 3; and Adolph, 4 months. — 1857 Minnesota Census, Washington Co., T. 28 N., R. 21 W., p. 138, nos. 13-22, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm r. 5.

¹⁰ Peterson, "Horse and Buggy Days," 3-4.

¹¹ The 1860 U.S. Census, enumerated 30 June 1860, lists the following individuals in the Peterson household located in Stearns Co., NO TWP L (near Sauk Centre): John F., 41, farmer; Ericka C., 39; Paulina E., 19; Victor F., 17, farm laborer; John E., 15, farm laborer; Erick T., 14; Nelson, 12; Elizabeth, 8; Christina, 5; and Adolph, 3. — 1860 U.S. Census, Minnesota, Stearns Co., NO TWP L (Sauk Centre), p. 66, nos. 1-10, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm r. 574.

¹² Peterson, "Horse and Buggy Days," 5.

¹³ Board of Commissioners, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, 2d ed., vol. 1, (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1891), 193.

¹⁴ Ibid., 381.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this conflict see Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, 2d ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1976).

¹⁶ See Notes for Table 2, no. 27 in James E. Erickson and Laura J. Erickson, "Scandinavian Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN Members, 1853-1860," *Swedish American Genealogist* Vol. 14 (December 1994):

¹⁷ Peterson, "Horse and Buggy Days," 5-7. The 1865 Minnesota Census, enumerated 1 June 1865, lists the following individuals living in the Peterson household in Afton, Washington Co.: Erica C., Pauline, Victor, John, Theoder E., Godfrey, Elizabeth, Hortense, Adolph, and Oscar A. — 1865 Minnesota Census, Washington Co., Afton, no. 90, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm r. 3.

¹⁸ Commissioners, *Civil and Indian Wars*, vol. 1, 381; "164 Minnesotans lie buried in Jefferson Barracks graves," *Minnesota Genealogist* 22 (Dec. 1991), 158-59.

¹⁹ The 1870 U.S. Census, enumerated 22 July, lists the following members of the Peterson family living together in Afton: Catharine, 49, keeping house; Godfrey, 21, farming; Elizabeth, 18; Hortense, 14; Adolph, 13; and Oscar, 9. The value of their real estate was estimated at \$6000; their personal estate at \$2416. — 1870 U.S. Census, Minnesota, Washington Co., Afton, p. 15, nos. 25-30, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm r. 12.

²⁰ LeRoy DuBois, "Washington County Marriages—16 Jul. 1870 - 1 Dec. 1870," *Minnesota Genealogical Journal* 7 (Nov. 1987), 689.

²¹ Peterson, "Horse and Buggy Days," 8.

²² *Saint Paul Pioneer*, 30 August 1870, 2.

²³ Peterson, "Horse and Buggy Days," 8-9. The 1875 Minnesota Census lists the following individuals living at 118 Woodward in St. Paul: E. C., 54; Oscar, 14; Adolph, 18; and Hortence, 20. Two boarders—George Eastwood, 20, and Wm. Murry, age 25—were also listed in the household. — 1875 Minnesota Census, Ramsey Co., St. Paul, No. 3 - 5th Ward, p. 985, nos. 25-30, Minnesota Historical Society microfilm r. 14.

²⁴ "Died / Peterson-Holmes," *Saint Paul and Minneapolis Pioneer Press*, 5 Dec. 1878, 7.

Swedish Residents in an Old People's Home in Chicago

Recently, one of our subscribers, John R. Moore of Chicago, sent us an unusual item - *A History of the Norwegian Old People's Home in Norwood Park, IL*, written by the attending physician of that institution, Dr. L.M. Bowes, and published by him in 1940. Of particular interest is the fact that the history lists all of the residents by name, birth date, when he or she entered the home and from which part of Scandinavia they came. As one would surmise, the majority of the residents were Norwegians, but there were also a few Swedes, who were as follows:

Danielson, Charles Johan, b. 26 Jan. 1847; came from Göteborg, entered the home 16 Oct. 1916.

Hedberg, Elizabeth, Mrs., b. 17 Jan. 1869; came from Borås, entered the home 1 June 1939.

Lee, Christine N., Mrs., b. 15 Sept. 1853; came from Värmland; entered the home 20 Nov. 1931.

Pearson, Johanna C., Mrs., b. 13 Sept. 1865; came from Dalsland; entered the home 16 June 1940.